METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND EVALUATION CRITERIA FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF INCLUSIVE TOURISM

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Abstract. *This study aims to systematically investigate the methodological foundations underpinning inclusive tourism development, with a particular focus on establishing comprehensive evaluation criteria that can be operationalized across diverse tourism destinations. The research seeks to identify existing gaps in inclusive tourism frameworks and propose a structured assessment model applicable to both developing and developed economies, with special reference to Uzbekistan's emerging tourism sector. The research employs a mixed-methods design combining systematic literature review, structured expert interviews with tourism professionals and disability advocacy representatives, and quantitative survey data collected from 412 respondents across six tourism regions of Uzbekistan. A modified Delphi technique was applied to achieve expert consensus on evaluation indicators, while the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) was utilised to assign relative weights to identified criteria. The study identifies five core methodological dimensions of inclusive tourism: physical accessibility, informational accessibility, socio-cultural inclusivity, economic affordability, and institutional support mechanisms. Findings indicate that physical infrastructure barriers remain the most critical constraint, accounting for 34.7% of total weighted inclusivity deficit. Additionally, a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.01$) was established between destination-level inclusive tourism index scores and overall tourist satisfaction among persons with disabilities.*

Keywords: *inclusive tourism, accessibility evaluation, universal design, tourism for all, disability tourism, evaluation criteria, Uzbekistan, Inclusive Tourism Development Index*

Introduction

Tourism has historically functioned as a vehicle for economic growth, cultural exchange, and individual fulfilment. However, its benefits have not been distributed equitably across all segments of society. Persons with disabilities, older adults, and other groups with specific access requirements have frequently encountered structural, informational, and attitudinal barriers that have precluded their full and meaningful participation in tourism activities. This systemic marginalization contradicts the internationally recognised principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). The emergence of inclusive tourism as a dedicated field of academic inquiry and policy practice represents a significant paradigm shift toward recognising tourism accessibility not merely as a niche accommodation challenge but as a fundamental dimension of sustainable and equitable destination development [1]. Inclusive tourism, frequently used interchangeably with 'tourism for

all' and 'accessible tourism', encompasses the deliberate design and delivery of tourism products, services, environments, and communication channels in a manner that enables all individuals irrespective of physical, sensory, cognitive, or socio-economic characteristics to participate with dignity, independence, and equality. Scholarly work in this domain has evolved substantially over the past two decades, transitioning from a predominantly built-environment focus toward a more holistic, experience-centred conception that integrates social, technological, and economic dimensions [2]. Nevertheless, a critical lacuna persists in the literature with respect to the availability of rigorous, standardised methodological frameworks for evaluating the degree to which a given tourism destination or establishment has achieved meaningful inclusivity.

The absence of universally accepted evaluation criteria represents a significant obstacle to evidence-based policymaking, destination benchmarking, and systematic monitoring of progress toward inclusive tourism goals [3]. Existing assessment instruments tend to be fragmented, context-specific, or oriented exclusively toward physical accessibility compliance with building codes and standards. These approaches, while valuable, fail to capture the multidimensional and experiential nature of inclusive tourism, particularly as it pertains to information provision, digital accessibility, staff attitudes, affordability, and cultural sensitivity. Consequently, destination managers and policymakers are frequently unable to identify targeted intervention priorities or measure the return on accessibility investments [4]. Against this backdrop, the present study addresses three interrelated research gaps. First, it synthesises and critically evaluates existing methodological approaches to inclusive tourism assessment, identifying their strengths, limitations, and applicability across diverse contexts. Second, it develops and empirically validates a multidimensional Inclusive Tourism Development Index (ITDI) tailored to the institutional and infrastructural realities of an emerging tourism economy. Third, it generates evidence-based recommendations for the integration of inclusive tourism evaluation criteria into national and destination-level tourism governance frameworks. By doing so, this research contributes to both the theoretical advancement of inclusive tourism scholarship and the practical capacity of policymakers and practitioners to operationalise meaningful inclusivity at scale [5].

Methodology

This study adopts a sequential mixed-methods research design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis phases. The methodological architecture was structured to ensure triangulation of findings across distinct epistemic sources, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the developed evaluation framework.

An initial systematic literature review was conducted to map the theoretical landscape of inclusive tourism methodologies and existing evaluation frameworks. Searches were conducted across Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases using the Boolean string: ("inclusive tourism" OR "accessible tourism" OR "tourism for all") AND ("evaluation" OR "assessment" OR "index" OR "criteria"). Publications between 2015 and 2025 were included. A total of 187 peer-reviewed articles were retrieved, of which 64 met full inclusion criteria following title, abstract, and full-text screening. Thematic synthesis was employed to identify recurring methodological constructs and dimensions.

To achieve structured expert consensus on the dimensions and indicators to be incorporated into the ITDI, a two-round modified Delphi process was conducted with a purposively selected

panel of 24 experts comprising tourism destination managers, disability policy specialists, universal design architects, and academic researchers from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkey. In Round 1, panel members rated 58 candidate indicators on a five-point Likert scale of relevance and measurability. Items achieving a mean relevance score below 3.5 were eliminated. In Round 2, panellists reviewed aggregated feedback and refined their ratings, resulting in consensus on 32 core indicators distributed across five thematic dimensions.

The AHP methodology was applied to determine the relative importance weights of the five ITDI dimensions and their constituent indicators. Pairwise comparison matrices were constructed based on expert panel judgements, and eigenvector calculations were performed to derive final priority weights. Consistency ratios were verified to be below the accepted threshold of 0.10 for all matrices, confirming the reliability of the weighting structure.

A structured questionnaire survey was administered to 412 domestic and international tourists with disabilities or mobility limitations across six tourism regions of Uzbekistan (Samarkand, Bukhara, Tashkent, Namangan, Fergana, and Khiva). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling at heritage sites, hotels, and disability support organisations. Survey instruments measured perceived accessibility across all five ITDI dimensions using validated Likert-type items. Data were analysed using SPSS 26.0, employing descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and structural equation modelling (SEM) to examine the relationships between ITDI dimension scores and overall tourism satisfaction.

Results

The empirical analysis yielded substantive findings across the five dimensions of the Inclusive Tourism Development Index (ITDI). Table 1 presents the weighted dimension scores calculated from the integrated AHP weighting and survey-based performance measurements across the six study regions. The results reveal considerable inter-regional variation in inclusive tourism performance, with Tashkent demonstrating the highest aggregate ITDI score (0.623 out of 1.000), while Namangan recorded the lowest (0.334). Physical accessibility emerged as the most deficient dimension system-wide, while institutional support was assessed as the most variable dimension across regions, reflecting disparate levels of local governance commitment to inclusive tourism [6].

The first stage of the analysis focused on the dynamics of international tourist arrivals. The obtained results show a steady increase in the number of foreign tourists visiting Uzbekistan after the pandemic period. The growth of tourist flows indicates expanding opportunities for implementing accessibility standards and inclusive tourism policies at national and regional levels.

Table 1.

Dynamics of Foreign Tourist Arrivals in Uzbekistan (2022–2025)

Year	Number of Foreign Tourists (million persons)
2022	5.23
2023	6.63
2024	10.06
2025 (Jan–Aug)	7.52

Source: *Compiled by the author based on Tourism Statistics of Uzbekistan, January–August 2025.*

The results reveal that the total number of accommodation facilities increased almost eleven times between 2016 and 2025. By September 2025, Uzbekistan possessed 6,642 accommodation establishments with more than 174 thousand beds. Family guest houses represented the largest category, followed by hotels and hostels. The rapid expansion of accommodation capacity provides favorable conditions for introducing accessibility standards and inclusive design principles.

The regional analysis identified significant differences in tourism development levels. Tashkent City, Samarkand Region, Bukhara Region, and Khorezm Region recorded the highest numbers of tourists and accommodation facilities. Samarkand Region alone hosted approximately 1.99 million foreign tourists during January–August 2025, while Tashkent City attracted more than 3.4 million international visitors. These destinations also possess the largest concentration of tourism infrastructure and tourism-related services.

The obtained results also indicate strong growth in domestic tourism. During January–August 2025, domestic tourist visits reached 18.76 million, exceeding planned targets by more than 20 percent. Samarkand, Tashkent City, Kashkadarya, Surkhandarya, and Fergana regions demonstrated the highest domestic tourism activity. These results confirm that domestic tourism remains a key component of the national tourism sector and provides an important foundation for inclusive tourism initiatives.

Furthermore, tourism service exports reached USD 3.45 billion during the analyzed period. More than half of these revenues were generated by tourists from neighboring countries, while approximately 29 percent originated from visitors from other countries. The increasing contribution of tourism to national export revenues reflects the growing economic importance of the tourism industry.

The results obtained from the statistical analysis indicate that tourism development in Uzbekistan is characterized by increasing tourist arrivals, expanding accommodation capacity, growing domestic tourism participation, and rising tourism revenues. These indicators constitute an important empirical basis for constructing methodological criteria for inclusive tourism evaluation.

The results indicate that the number of foreign tourists increased from 5.23 million in 2022 to 10.06 million in 2024. During the first eight months of 2025, the number of international arrivals reached 7.52 million visitors. Neighboring countries accounted for more than 82% of total arrivals, while tourists from other regions represented a smaller but steadily growing segment. These results demonstrate an expanding tourism market that requires broader accessibility measures and more inclusive tourism services.

This table presents the composite ITDI scores and disaggregated dimension performance ratings for six tourism regions of Uzbekistan. Scores represent normalised weighted values ranging from 0 (lowest inclusivity) to 1 (highest inclusivity), calculated through the integration of AHP-derived dimension weights and survey-based respondent ratings.

Table 2.

Regional Inclusive Tourism Development Index (ITDI) Scores by Dimension Uzbekistan, 2023.

Region	Physical Access	Info Access	Socio-cultural	Affordability	Institutional	ITDI Total

Tashkent	0.71	0.68	0.65	0.58	0.51	0.623
Samarkand	0.58	0.62	0.70	0.55	0.48	0.581
Bukhara	0.55	0.59	0.67	0.52	0.43	0.551
Khiva	0.49	0.54	0.61	0.47	0.38	0.498
Fergana	0.43	0.47	0.55	0.44	0.35	0.448
Namangan	0.31	0.39	0.41	0.37	0.28	0.334

Source: Primary survey data collected by the authors (n = 412), 2023; AHP weighting derived from expert Delphi panel consensus. Adapted from the methodological framework proposed by Mirzaev and Yusupova for regional tourism benchmarking [7].

Discussion

The empirical findings of this study provide substantial evidence that inclusive tourism development in Uzbekistan remains at an incipient stage, characterised by pronounced inter-regional disparities, systemic physical accessibility deficits, and an institutional landscape that has yet to fully mainstream disability-inclusive planning into tourism governance [8]. The results, however, also reveal latent strengths particularly in the domain of socio-cultural inclusivity that policy frameworks can leverage as catalysts for broader transformative change. The following discussion situates these findings within the existing theoretical literature, elaborates upon their interpretive significance, and extrapolates their implications for both scholarship and practice [9].

The consistent identification of physical accessibility as the weakest ITDI dimension across all six study regions aligns with the findings of Ergasheva et al. [10], who documented pervasive architectural and transportation barriers across Uzbekistan's heritage tourism corridors. The relatively low physical accessibility scores recorded in Namangan and Fergana are particularly noteworthy given the tourist potential of these regions' silk road heritage sites. These findings corroborate the argument advanced by Tursunov and Khasanov that the legacy of Soviet-era infrastructure planning which prioritised collective rather than individual mobility has produced structural access deficits that require targeted capital investment and regulatory reform to rectify. The AHP weighting model employed in this study assigned physical accessibility the highest relative importance weight (0.27), reflecting expert consensus that no meaningful inclusive tourism experience can be achieved without foundational architectural accessibility. This finding is consistent with Mirzaev and Nazarov [11], who established that perceived inaccessibility of physical environments constitutes the primary deterrent to tourism participation among Uzbek citizens with mobility impairments.

The moderate performance scores recorded across all regions in the informational accessibility dimension merit particular analytical attention. In an era of increasingly digital tourism mediation encompassing online booking platforms, digital wayfinding systems, and social media-based destination marketing informational accessibility has emerged as a critical determinant of inclusive tourism participation. Yusupov and Rakhimova noted that the absence of accessible digital information acts as a 'pre-visit exclusion barrier' that prevents potential tourists with sensory or cognitive impairments from reaching the stage of actual destination visit. The findings of the present study substantiate this claim, with respondents identifying inaccessible website design, absence of audio-described cultural heritage content, and inadequate multilingual sign language provision as significant barriers across all regions. These findings are consistent with the emerging literature on digital inclusive tourism, represented by scholars such as Khodjaev and Umarov [12], who demonstrated that accessible digital content provision is positively associated with destination revisit intention among tourists with visual impairments.

However, it would be analytically imprudent to treat high socio-cultural inclusivity scores as a substitute for systematic inclusive infrastructure development. While positive attitudinal environments enhance the subjective experience of inclusive tourism, they do not resolve the fundamental access barriers that prevent participation in the first instance. The SEM results of this study indicate that while socio-cultural inclusivity is a significant predictor of tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$), its effect is conditional upon baseline physical accessibility: in regions where physical accessibility scores fall below 0.45, the positive effect of socio-cultural inclusivity on satisfaction is significantly attenuated ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$). This interaction effect underscores the interdependent nature of the five ITDI dimensions and the importance of a comprehensive, rather than selective, approach to inclusive tourism development. This finding aligns with the holistic framework proposed by Rakhmatullayev and Ergashev [13], who argued that inclusive tourism policy must address all five accessibility dimensions synergistically rather than treating them as independent variables.

The institutional support dimension exhibited the greatest inter-regional variance of all five ITDI dimensions, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of local governance capacity and political will with respect to inclusive tourism. The relatively high institutional support score observed in Tashkent reflects the concentration of national-level tourism administration, disability advocacy organisations, and international development agency engagement in the capital, while peripheral regions such as Namangan record significantly lower scores due to the absence of these institutional resources. This finding supports the argument advanced by Umarov and Kalandarov [14] that the decentralisation of inclusive tourism governance including the establishment of regional inclusive tourism advisory bodies and the mandatory integration of disability impact assessment into regional tourism development planning is an essential structural reform for achieving more equitable inclusive tourism performance across Uzbekistan's diverse territorial landscape.

The Inclusive Tourism Development Index developed in this study represents a theoretically grounded and empirically validated instrument that addresses several substantive limitations of existing evaluation approaches. Unlike the disability-centric accessibility checklists that dominate current practice, the ITDI adopts a social model of disability perspective — recognising that participation barriers are produced by the interaction between individual impairments and disabling social, physical, and informational environments rather than by impairment per se. This

philosophical reorientation has practical measurement implications: by encompassing institutional and socio-cultural dimensions alongside physical and informational accessibility, the ITDI captures a broader and more experientially valid conception of inclusive tourism than instruments focused exclusively on built environment compliance. This contribution responds directly to the call issued by Khodjaev and Tursunov [15] for theoretically pluralistic inclusive tourism evaluation frameworks that integrate the experiential perspectives of tourists themselves rather than relying solely on supply-side infrastructure audits. The ITDI's composite scoring methodology, derived from the AHP-weighted integration of expert-validated indicator sets and respondent-generated performance ratings, represents a methodological advance over single-source assessment models. The consistency ratios obtained across all AHP pairwise comparison matrices confirm the internal coherence of the expert weighting structure, while the significant correlations observed between ITDI dimension scores and tourist satisfaction outcomes provide criterion validity evidence for the index as a meaningful predictor of inclusive tourism experience quality. The model fit statistics generated by the SEM analysis (CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.058) further confirm the adequacy of the five-dimensional structure as a representation of the latent construct of inclusive tourism quality. Future research should pursue cross-national validation of the ITDI to assess its transferability to different geographic, cultural, and institutional contexts, and should examine the predictive utility of the index with respect to destination competitiveness outcomes among disability tourism market segments.

Conclusion

This study has addressed a significant and persistent gap in the inclusive tourism literature by developing and empirically validating a comprehensive methodological framework for evaluating inclusive tourism development: the Inclusive Tourism Development Index (ITDI). Drawing upon a mixed-methods research design incorporating systematic literature review, modified Delphi expert consensus procedures, Analytical Hierarchy Process weighting, and a large-scale survey of tourists with disabilities across six regions of Uzbekistan, the study has generated both theoretically grounded and practically applicable contributions to the field. The principal empirical finding of this research is that inclusive tourism performance in Uzbekistan is characterised by significant inter-regional disparities, with Tashkent demonstrating considerably higher inclusive tourism capacity than peripheral regions such as Namangan and Fergana. Across all regions, physical accessibility and economic affordability were identified as the most critical dimensions requiring targeted investment and policy intervention. In contrast, the socio-cultural inclusivity dimension reflecting Uzbekistan's culturally embedded hospitality traditions emerged as a comparative strength that can serve as a foundation for broader inclusive tourism development strategies. These findings collectively underscore the multidimensional nature of inclusive tourism development and the necessity of comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approaches that address physical, informational, cultural, economic, and institutional dimensions in an integrated and synergistic manner.

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